



Onboarding and Engaging Local Schools

WHY SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

Schools are trusted, everyday touchpoints for families, making them powerful partners in IRIS. When engaged, they extend the network's reach, helping families access supports through people they already have a relationship with. At the same time, many school districts face real challenges: limited staff capacity, competing priorities, and existing systems that may not easily align with new tools. Thoughtful engagement helps schools see IRIS as a complement to their work rather than an added burden.

This guidance equips IRIS Local Leadership Teams with lessons learned from existing IRIS Communities and strategies to build partnerships that are both practical and sustainable.

START WITH RELATIONSHIPS AND LOCAL CONTEXT

Strong school partnerships begin with knowing your community—its key players, initiatives, and entry points. IRIS Communities that have successfully onboarded schools often leverage existing relationships to open the door.

IRIS Communities that start with schools where relationships already exist see faster buy-in and smoother implementation. IRIS Local Leaders in DeKalb, Illinois, for example, chose a smaller district with a pre-established connection, which gave them an early win and credibility to approach larger districts.

"Number one... it's knowing the community that you are a part of. Knowing those key partners and knowing where those access points are in your community." – Hillary Cali, DeKalb ROE, DeKalb, Illinois

Putting it into Practice

- Map existing relationships between schools and current IRIS partners.
- Identify one or two districts where relationships are strongest and start there.
- Use early adopters to demonstrate success and build momentum for broader outreach.

BE CONCISE AND RESPECT TIME

School administrators and staff often juggle packed schedules and competing priorities. Long or overly detailed presentations risk overwhelming school staff. Respecting their time demonstrates that you understand their reality and builds goodwill. Giving superintendents a short, high-level overview instead of an in-depth presentation, then quickly shifting focus to identifying the right staff for more in-depth discussions, can lead to more streamlined adoption and better engagement.

Putting it into Practice

- Keep initial presentations to 5–10 minutes, focused on the *why* and the big picture.
- Use those conversations to ask: *“Who on your team should we connect with to explore how this might work day-to-day?”*
- Follow up with tailored training and resources for the staff who will use IRIS directly.

MEET DISTRICTS WHERE THEY ARE

No two school districts are alike. Size, staffing, and internal structures all shape how they can use IRIS. In some school districts superintendents wear multiple hats, while others have entire teams of counselors, nurses, and directors over student services and programs. IRIS Local Leaders who adapt to these differences are more successful than those who take a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, districts were more receptive when they could see models from other districts or communities, then customize them for their own context.

Putting it into Practice

- Listen first: ask districts how referrals currently flow, and who is most often responsible.
- Identify the right entry points. It may be different for each school district!
- Share examples of different IRIS workflows.
- Emphasize flexibility: there is no “right way,” just what works best for their district.

BUILD AWARENESS ACROSS THE SCHOOL

Not every staff member in a school will (or should) log in to IRIS, but all staff in a school building have a role in connecting families to support. Teachers, paraprofessionals, lunch staff, and coaches often notice student or family needs first. Building broad awareness ensures those observations don’t stop at the classroom door but are routed to the right staff member who can make the referral in IRIS.

Teachers and other school staff who were aware of what IRIS offers, and who their school’s referral “point people” were, could spot needs (“I see this family could use housing support”) and then connect the student or family to appropriate staff to initiate the referral. This approach gives schools structure and flexibility to ensure referrals happen without overburdening every staff member.

Putting it into Practice

- Clarify who will be referral leads— staff in the building who will make referrals (e.g., counselors, nurses, family liaisons).
- Provide IRIS training to referral leads but also give all staff basic awareness of the resources available through IRIS.
- Create quick guides or “IRIS at a glance” one-pagers that staff can keep handy.
- Encourage principals to embed IRIS awareness into existing staff meetings or professional development sessions.

LEVERAGE PEER CHAMPIONS AND DEMONSTRATE VALUE

Schools are more likely to adopt IRIS when they see others using it successfully and when the benefits are clear. Peer influence—especially among staff in similar roles like nurses or counselors—often

carries more weight than formal presentations. At the same time, many districts are motivated by value: they want tools that save time, reduce duplication, and don't strain limited budgets.

In the Will County IRIS Network, a district had previously invested in an expensive referral system that failed to deliver results. IRIS's no-cost, community-based approach was a clear incentive to engage. Adoption spreads fastest when networks highlight both the peer validation and the practical benefits!

"They tried a paid referral system and were promised many things... and it didn't pan out. Since IRIS doesn't cost them anything—I think that's a good incentive right there." Rebecca Anderson, Will County All Our Kids Network, Will County, Illinois

Putting it into Practice

- Encourage early-adopter schools to share their experiences with nearby districts.
- Create opportunities for school staff (nurses, counselors, social workers) to hear directly from peers in other districts.
- Share quick wins and success stories widely, both to celebrate progress and to demonstrate value to hesitant districts.

PRACTICE PATIENCE AND PERSISTENCE

Engaging schools in IRIS is not typically a quick process. Districts are constantly balancing competing priorities like testing schedules, staffing shortages, budget pressures, and more. For many, the timing has to be right before they can fully engage. IRIS Local Leaders who stay present and consistent, without being pushy, are better positioned to build trust and secure buy-in over time.

Schools often need to see IRIS in action elsewhere before they feel ready. Gentle persistence keeps the door open until that moment comes. This patience also allows IRIS Communities to build credibility: showing up for school initiatives or community collaboratives even when IRIS isn't the focus builds trust that pays off later.

Putting it into Practice

- Stay visible. Attend school or district events, roundtables, and collaboratives, even if IRIS isn't on the agenda.
- Use "soft touch" check-ins: short updates, invitations to hear peer stories, or share success stories.
- Recognize that engagement may take years and celebrate small steps along the way.
- Avoid pressuring schools into signing on before they're ready; position IRIS as a standing opportunity they can lean into when the time is right.